

## CHAPTER 4

# An Imperiled World

## *Heimskringla*

“Snorri hefur ætlað sér að skrifa veraldarsögu norrænna manna, fjalla um uppruna norrænna manna (*origo gentis*).” (Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum* [1988], 288)

Snorri intended to write a world history of the Norsemen, to treat of the origins of the Norsemen (*origo gentis*).

Neither *Morkinskinna* nor *Fagrskinna* has a proper title; they are referred to with names that are strictly speaking used for the manuscripts in which they are found—“rotten parchment” and “fair parchment.” The title of the third compilation, *Heimskringla*, is, as in the case of *Íslendingabók*, taken from the first sentence of the text: “The circle of the world [‘kringla heimsins’] that is inhabited by people is very indented by bodies of water.”<sup>1</sup> The author describes the great ocean that passes through the Straits of Gibraltar and flows all the way to Jerusalem and thence into the Black Sea, which (in turn) divides the three parts of the world, Asia to the east, Europe (or “Eneá”) to the west and Africa to the south. The River Don (Tanais) runs down from the north, empties into the Black Sea, and separates Asia from Europe. The area north of the Black Sea is known as “Svíþjóð in mikla” (“Greater Sweden”) or “Svíþjóð in kalda” (“Cold Sweden”) and is no smaller than Serkland (Saracen Land) and is sometimes equated with Bláland (Africa). The Tanakvísl (Don branch) was once called Vanakvísl or the land of the Vanir (a family of gods).<sup>2</sup>

Thus *Heimskringla*, unlike *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, which are strictly chronicles of kings, prefaces its account with a geographical

setting. That broadens the spatial coverage but also deepens the well of the past by recognizing that the shape of the land was in place before humans arrived on the scene. Additionally, it provides a divine prehistory by associating the word Asia with the dominant family of pagan gods, the Æsir, and hypothesizing the dealings of Æsir and Vanir as a first stage of early history in the distant East. The pagan ancestry is destined to be replaced by the true Christian religion, which readers of Scripture would have known to have its origin in the East as well. The author adds a third strand with a reference to Europe as “Eneá,” suggesting the Trojan diaspora and another form of the progress of ancient civilization from the East, a form destined to embrace Northern Europe in its Christian manifestation.<sup>3</sup>

In this way the author places his history of the Norwegian kings in a very large context of cartographic space and world history. This change amounts to a reconceptualization of history, and the new perspective transforms the simple chronicle form into something that readers eight hundred years later can recognize as a history of ideas. It implies changes over time and space and an evolution from primitive forms to more advanced concepts. That Norway’s civilization evolves from the East is not a proposition that would seem foreign to a modern Norwegian historian, although the role of Scythia or “Greater Sweden” would not figure prominently and would yield to a Greco-Roman perspective from the south. The perceived movement of civilization is nonetheless analogous. We will see, however, that the westward trajectory of the narrative is not so much a case of *ex oriente lux* as it is a matter of *ex oriente tenebrae*, shadows that disperse only gradually as the Æsir make their way westward.

## 1. The Narrative

The chieftain of the Æsir in the East is Odin, who is described as a great *blótmaðr* (performer of sacrifices), a term that takes on a very disparaging tone in the Icelandic Christian era. He is also a great warrior and is victorious far and wide. He seems, however, to be enveloped in a penumbra of superstition and primitive practices; during one of his absences his brothers Vé and Vílir share his property and, mysteriously, both marry his wife Frigg, whom Odin must repossess when he returns home.<sup>4</sup> The culminating event in the eastern prehistory is a war between the Æsir and the Vanir. It concludes with a

peace treaty and an exchange of high-status personages and wise men, somewhat to the advantage of the Æsir, who are conceived of as being rather more advanced than the Vanir. The Æsir do, however, acquire a knowledge of magic from the Vanir.

Odin is also credited with substantial territory in the Near East, but he has prophetic powers that allow him to foresee his destiny in the North. He therefore installs his brothers Vé and Vílir in Asia Minor and settles first in Garðaríki (Russia), then to the south in Saxony. From here his travels take him to Odense on the Danish island of Fyn. The location in Denmark furnishes the occasion for telling the myth that recounts how the goddess Gefjón plows up the land in the area now filled by the body of water in Sweden known as Mälaren and converts it into the Danish island of Zealand, which is alleged to have the same shape. Odin then fixes his residence in Sweden in preparation for the Swedish Yngling dynasty. There is thus a prelude in Scandinavian Sweden as well as in “Greater Sweden” to the east. After uneventful reigns by Njörðr and Freyr the rule of Sweden passes, with no attempt at transition, from the divine plane to the human plane, specifically the Yngling dynasty, beginning with a king named Fjölfnir, son of Yngvifreyr.

The author stated at the very outset of the prologue that the poem “Ynglingatal” accounts for the death and burial site of each member of the Yngling dynasty.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Fjölfnir we learn that in a drunken stupor he falls into a mead vat and drowns. That sets the stage for a long series of strange and unusual demises in the Yngling succession:

Sveigðr disappears into a large rock inhabited by a dwarf and never reemerges. Vanlandi is trodden to death by a “mara” (nighttime monster) in his sleep. Vísburr is burned in his house. Dómaldi is blamed for a famine and is sacrificed for fertility. Dómarr, exceptionally, dies a natural death, as does his son Dyggvi. Dagr, seeking vengeance for the death of a magically informative sparrow is killed by a slave wielding a pitchfork. Agni is hanged by the daughter of a Finnish king he has vanquished. Agni’s two sons Alrekr and Eiríkr kill each other with the bit bridles of horses. Alrekr’s two sons Yngvi and Álfr kill each other in a jealous rage. Álfr’s son Hugleikr and his two sons are killed by the “sea king” Haki, who assumes the rule of Sweden. Yngvi’s son Jörundr is hanged by the



son of the king of Hálogaland after a sea battle. Jǫrundr's son Aun (or Áni) sacrifices a series of nine sons to prolong his life, but the people prevent him from sacrificing the tenth son, and he finally dies. His son Egill fights a long campaign with the aid of the Danes against a slave rebellion but is ultimately killed by a maddened bull. His son Óttarr in turn falls out with the Danes and is killed while raiding in Jutland. Óttarr's son Aðils raids in Saxony and marries the fair maid Yrsa. She is in turn abducted by Hrólfr kraki in Lejre, where she stays until she learns that she is Hrólfr's daughter and returns to Aðils, who ultimately dies by falling from a horse. His son Eysteinn is killed by the sea king Sólvi, who rules the Swedes until he is betrayed by them. His son Yngvarr is killed in an attack on Estonia. Yngvarr's son Qnundr is much beloved for his peaceful ways and devotes himself to clearing the land and building roads, but he dies in an avalanche. His son Ingjaldr, who is defeated in an early boyhood contest, is given a wolf's heart to eat and celebrates his father's funeral by burning six neighboring kings in their halls to facilitate the unification of the realm. The king Granmarr sees trouble in the offing and arranges a marriage alliance with another king named Hjǫrvarðr. Ingjaldr attacks the allies, but they ultimately make terms, although Granmarr has an intimation of death, an intimation that is fulfilled when Ingjaldr once more goes on the attack and burns Granmarr and Hjǫrvarðr in their hall. He incorporates their lands and becomes ruler of most of Sweden, but he is burned in his hall by Ívarr inn víðfaðmi in Skáney (Skåne, Scania). Ívarr now becomes the ruler of all Sweden, all Denmark, a large part of the Baltic region, and a fifth of England. He subsequently becomes the ancestor of the Danish and Swedish kings and puts an end to the Yngling dynasty. In the meantime Ingjaldr's son Óláfr trételgja settles Värmland, but he becomes another victim of the Swedish propensity to blame the king for famine and they therefore sacrifice him for fertility. In place of Óláfr they then appoint a certain Hálfdan hvítbeinn as king and move into Norwegian territory in Raumaríki, Heiðmǫrk, Þótn, Haðaland, and Vestfold, where he is eventually buried. After the death of his brother Ingjaldr he also reacquires Värmland. The line of descent concludes with a few more links: Eysteinn, Hálfdan, Guðrøðr, Óláfr, and Rǫgnvaldr heiðumhæri, with whose praise the final stanza concludes.



This dynastic rehearsal is no more engaging to read than to recount, although the final phases do seem to focus the theme of aggregating territory. The concatenation is usually taken to be a simple summary, with some elaboration, of the twenty-nine stanzas in Þjóðólfr ór Hvini's "Ynglingatal," normally one stanza for each king. Since the record of events is for the most part restricted to Sweden, we may wonder why so much space is devoted to Swedish prehistory in a book about Norway. The synoptic histories (Theodoricus's *Historia de Antiquitate* and *Ágrip*), as well as Sæmundr Sigfússon's lost history, began with demonstrably Norwegian kings, and *Fagrskinna* followed suit. The ostensible reason for the inclusion of Swedish prehistory in *Heimskringla* is that the Yngling dynasty spills over into Norway in its latter phases, beginning with Hálfðan hvíttbeinn's acquisition of Norwegian provinces. But there may be other contributing factors as well. The author shows a real taste for historical dredging in the Asian prelude, and his genealogical instincts may have been reinforced by the genealogical precedents in Genesis. The violent and sometimes eerie death accounts, especially in the first stages of the Yngling dynasty, may also have served to ratify the magical and heathenish intonations of the Asian prelude. The organization of the narrative seems to argue that Norway arose out of a dark era of superstition into a clearer day of ordered and ultimately Christian understanding.

The Swedish prelude has the additional advantage of fitting into the historical progress from east to west and suggesting a midpoint between the profound paganism of Æsir and Vanir in Asia and eventual enlightenment in Norway. From the Norwegian perspective the Swedes were considered to be a backward people mired in heathen ways because Christianity took root among them more slowly than in coastal Norway.<sup>6</sup> The trajectory of *Heimskringla* therefore suggests a gradual evolution from the depths of ignorance in distant Asia through the intermediate confusions of early Sweden to the more settled outlook in Norway that will culminate in the conversion imposed by Óláfr Tryggvason at the end of *Heimskringla* I and more emphatically in the mission of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla* II.

Supplementing the theme of religious unification is the secondary theme of political unification, which surfaces toward the end of "Ynglinga saga." The king Ingjaldr Onundarson succeeds in unifying the whole of the Swedish realm, albeit by deceitful means, and his successor Ívarr víðfaðmi is able to extend the unification to the

neighboring regions as well. Unification becomes a dominant theme not only in *Heimskringla* but in much of later Norwegian historiography. Haraldr hárfagri's signal achievement is the unification of Norway, and for the two Óláfrs the unity of the country is hardly less important than the conversion to Christianity. This is an indication that political concerns have begun to overtake the religious concerns found in the earlier histories. As we will see in the next chapter, unification is also a constant theme in *Sverris saga* and a capital theme in late twelfth-century Norwegian history.

The fear of fragmentation now becomes a recurrent note. Óláfr Haraldsson's defeat at Stiklarstaðir plunges the country into Danish overlordship and a dismemberment of the realm. Unity is restored under King Magnús and persists for the rest of the eleventh century, but during the civil-war period after 1135 the kingdom is once more divided. A reassembling of the country becomes a guiding principle of King Sverrir's struggle. One of the low points is the tale of his failure to come to terms with Magnús Erlingsson because both of them are unalterably opposed to a sharing arrangement.<sup>7</sup> The ultimate reunification of the realm must wait for the advent of King Hákon Hákonarson and his recognition as sole ruler ca. 1230.

After "Ynglinga saga," the first generally acknowledged king of Norway is Hálfðan svartí, the son of the next-to-last king in the Yngling dynasty (Guðrøðr). He makes some additional conquests in southern and eastern Norway and competes for and wins the hand of Ragnhildr, the daughter of Sigurðr hjörtr in Hringaríki. Both Ragnhildr and Hálfðan have premonitory dreams forecasting that their progeny will be distributed over all Norway. Hálfðan succumbs when he falls through the ice in early spring on a lake in Haðaland.

The traditional beginning of Norwegian history dates from the advent of Hálfðan's son, who becomes known as Haraldr hárfagri (Fairhair). The synoptics viewed him as the first important figure, as did Sæmundr, but they passed over him quickly and seem to have been chiefly interested in his infatuation with a Finnish (Lappish) woman named Snæfríðr (or Snjófríðr). Even *Fagrskinna* is quite sparing of detail; it begins with a catalogue of virtues and runs a mere seventeen pages, nine of which are given over to the recording of twenty-five skaldic stanzas, which, like "Ynglinga saga," also produce a catalogue

effect. Haraldr takes possession of Þrándheimr and swears an oath not to cut his hair until he has subdued every remote valley and extended promontory in Norway. This vow entails a long campaign with many battles, the most important of which is in Hafrsfjörðr, while others are not specified. After a ten-year period of conquest he finally allows his hair to be cut. The story concludes with a listing of his sons and an account of his interaction with King Aðalsteinn (Athelstan) of England.

It is only *Heimskringla* that gives Haraldr's reign true saga dimensions. It also casts the narrative as a political plan, not just a summary but an ordering of events. We learn that Haraldr must begin by defending his claim to his patrimony against intrusive rivals. Only then can he secure the eastern provinces of Norway by imposing his rule successively in Hringaríki, Heiðmörk, Guðbrandsdalar, Haðaland, Þótn, Raumaríki, and Vingulmörk. At this point the author inserts an elaborate version of Haraldr's oath to conquer all Norway. It is connected with the story of a woman named Gyða, whom Haraldr covets but who declines to consort with a king who rules only a few paltry provinces rather than being the lord of a whole country like the kings of Denmark and Sweden. Rather than taking offense, Haraldr expresses gratitude to the woman for calling his attention to such an obvious mission, and he initiates the conquest by subjecting all of Þrándheimr and environs and forming an alliance with the jarls of Þrændaløg.

He is now in a position to provide himself with a great ship and a naval force, with which he proceeds down the coast to Mœrafylki, Raumsdalr, and Firðafylki. This sequence is somewhat reminiscent of King Sverrir's plan of conquest, and we may wonder whether the author, who could have had no precise sources for such a sequence, may have borrowed the route from *Sverris saga*, or perhaps from a calculation of what might be logical under the circumstances.<sup>8</sup> The author then skips over the provinces of Hjørðaland, Rogaland, Jaðarr, and Agðir and dispatches Haraldr directly to Túnsberg. Here he learns that the Swedish king has encroached on Värmland, which he proceeds to subdue together with a certain amount of territory in Västergötland. In the meantime there is an uprising inspired by the leading figures in the southwest, but Haraldr is able to defeat them in the great Battle of Hafrsfjörðr.



The resistance is now broken and there is a general exodus of the defeated factions to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides. The resulting unification is twice underscored for emphasis: “King Haraldr had now become sole ruler of all Norway” and “He had taken possession of all the land.”<sup>9</sup> Gyða had challenged Haraldr to become a “þjóðkonungr,” a national king, and this version of his story tells us in some detail how he did it. It does not merely record a few moments in the king’s life but reconstructs a historical narrative, telling the story of how Norway was assembled from disparate provinces to become the country of later history. The anecdotal materials that are primary in the earlier versions, the story of Snæfríðr and the interaction with King Aðalsteinn, survive only as postscripts.

Another thread in *Heimskringla* is the trajectory from east to west. Thus Sweden becomes an extension of the advance of the Æsir from Asia, and the beginning of state formation in Norway is an extension of the advance of the Yngling dynasty in Sweden. The story of Haraldr hárfagri takes the advance one step further when he is able to reduce the Orkney Islands to tributary status. This acquisition anticipates the conquests of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in the North Atlantic. It also anticipates the political orientation of the later kings’ lives, which become increasingly focused on the exercise of influence and the gaining of territory.

Haraldr hárfagri is depicted not only as an expansionist monarch but also as a model of political astuteness. His multiple sons, the product of a long life and many liaisons, become discontent with their lot. They assert their independence, oppose Haraldr’s jarls, and quarrel among themselves. The king resolves the situation by conferring the royal title on each, stipulating that every descendant of a king will have the same title and bestowing land on each of them. This arrangement seems to pacify the sons, but it constitutes a curious retraction of the principle of unity. Since the author was writing toward the end of a hundred years of political division in Norway (ca. 1135–1230), the arrangement must have prompted some discussion of whether Haraldr’s solution was wise only in the short term and risky in the long term. It is also contradicted by Eiríkr blóðøx’s desire to be *primus inter pares* and his father’s approval of that wish. To a Norwegian reader in the 1220s this must have looked like a warrant for dynastic disorder.

The consequences of the splintered realm are not long in materializing. After Haraldr hárfagri's death Norway should have fallen to the lot of Eiríkr blóðøx, as Haraldr intended. But when the youngest son Hákon, fostered in England by King Aðalsteinn, learns of his father's death, he immediately returns to Norway to stake a claim. *Heimskringla* states that he is fifteen years old. He works in collaboration with the great jarl of Þrándheimr, Sigurðr Hákonarson, who may be imagined to have thought that he could hold the young aspirant under his sway. The mechanism for attracting support is Hákon's promise to restore to the farmers the ancestral lands that had been confiscated by Haraldr hárfagri. If this bears any resemblance to historical reality, it could be viewed as a bid by Jarl Sigurðr to gain local popularity, but it could also have been a concession demanded by the farmers as the price of support. In either case it reveals a political way of thinking.

The author's position is clearly that Hákon, in collusion with, or under the guidance of, Jarl Sigurðr, outmaneuvers his older brother Eiríkr, who is unable to muster support and goes into exile. Hákon's success is depicted to some extent as a matter of personal qualities. He is an imposing figure who makes people believe that Haraldr hárfagri has returned in a new embodiment. He is described in the most engaging terms: "King Hákon was the cheeriest, most eloquent, and least assuming of men. He was exceptionally wise and very attentive to the establishment of laws."<sup>10</sup> Eiríkr, on the other hand, is described in almost exclusively negative terms: "Eiríkr was a big, handsome man, strong and very enterprising, a great warrior and victorious in battle, aggressive by nature, fierce, disagreeable, and not much given to words."<sup>11</sup> His standing is not improved by the magic arts, deceitfulness, and fierce disposition of his wife Gunnhildr, who becomes synonymous with wickedness in saga literature.<sup>12</sup> It is small wonder that the people rally to Hákon rather than Eiríkr.

There are clearly matters that work to Hákon's advantage, but eventually he too is beset by problems. Having been raised in England, Hákon finds himself somewhat isolated as a Christian in a pagan land. Because of his popularity he is able to convert some followers, but the people of Þrændaløg, including Jarl Sigurðr, prove to be adamant in their old ways and they insist that Hákon conform

to their traditions. Sigurðr tries to mediate as best he can, but both sides are distinctly dissatisfied. The practice that signals Hákon's Christian isolation is that when he must be present at sacrifices, he is in the habit of eating in a small house with a few men rather than occupying a central seat, but even in this matter he must bow to public pressure.<sup>13</sup> His anger is such that he gathers forces to march on Þrándheimr, but before he can carry out the plan, he gets news that the sons of King Eiríkr are advancing from the south.

Hákon is able to turn back the attack, and he tries to secure Norway by establishing a system of warning pyres along the coast, but after twenty years of rule Eiríkr's sons launch a renewed assault. Hákon once again prevails by stratagem and valor, but six years later the pattern repeats itself and there is a great battle at Storð off the island of Fitjar. Hákon once more has the best of it, but he is fatally wounded and sends word to the surviving sons of Eiríkr that, in the absence of male progeny, he leaves Norway to them. He also indicates to his followers that, even if he should recover from his wounds, he intends to return to his Christian heritage and repent his misdeeds against God. With respect to his burial he is indifferent and accordingly is laid to rest in full armor in a heathen barrow but without all the customary grave goods.

Hákon leaves behind an almost unparalleled reputation: "King Hákon was much lamented; both friends and enemies mourned his death and maintained that there would never again be an equally good king in Norway."<sup>14</sup> He was nonetheless out of keeping with his time because he was Christian before Norway was ready to follow his lead. The Norwegians are not entirely comfortable with him, nor he with them. This mismatch tells us something about the author's appreciation of historical ambiguities; the leader can be right but the moment wrong. Hákon's premature Christianity also introduces the important theme of religious culture, which has come full circle from the Vanir and Æsir in Asia but for which the time was not quite ripe, as it will be more nearly under the two Óláfrs. "Hákonar saga" therefore represents an intermediate stage in the intellectual history of medieval Scandinavia, a moment at which Christianity is an issue but not yet a culture.

After the fall of Hákon góði (ca. 960) the author inserts a section entitled "Haralds saga gráfeldar." Haraldr gráfeldr (Graycloak)



is one of the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, but he does not control the narrative to which the author attaches his name. The incidents related provide only a transition piece prefacing the story of Óláfr Tryggvason. There are scattered episodes, but for the most part the action is focused on the hostilities conducted by the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, who ensconce themselves in Norðmœrr, Raumsdalr, and Sunnmœrr on the central west coast, while Hákon jarl Sigurðarson secures Þrændalög after Gunnhildr's sons have contrived to murder his father Sigurðr jarl in an effort to win Þrændalög. The passage covers a period of about ten years but does not amount to a saga.

The narrative in *Heimskringla* I is organized into four blocs: the prelude in Asia and Sweden, the saga of Haraldr hárfagri, the saga of Hákon góði, and the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason. It may seem surprising that no coherent saga was devoted to Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, who had an exceptionally full and active reign for some twenty years, but the information about him is scattered in the insert about Haraldr gráfeldr and the saga about Óláfr Tryggvason rather than being gathered in a separate account. Hákon may have been disqualified on three counts. In the first place he never laid claim to the royal title; in the second place his sphere of influence was largely restricted to Þrændalög; and in the third place he represented a reversion to paganism and did not fit into the Christian trajectory of the book. The author may have wished to focus on the “þjóðkonungar,” national kings, and that focus is clearly in line with the focus on national unity, both political and religious, leading to the emergence of Norway as a single entity.

The sagas of Haraldr hárfagri and Hákon góði are about the creation and articulation of Norway as a political entity. Haraldr's saga is largely a tale of conquest, but Hákon is also devoted to the establishment of legal and religious institutions, that is, to the consolidation of Norway. When he dies, however, the hard-won unification of Norway begins to crack. Hákon jarl is able to maintain himself in Þrændalög, but he must contend with the sons of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr who continue to press their claims, to some extent in league with the Danish king. The whole sequence of the narrative, from the end of “Ynglinga saga” down to the death of Hákon góði, is preoccupied with the project of unity.

## 2. The Undercurrents

The saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is focused quite differently. Although Óláfr is the first king to impose religious uniformity on the country, his reign is short (five years) and subject to growing external pressures. It is a story not of consolidation but of vulnerability. There are challenges not only from persistent pagan elements within the country but also from increasingly organized incursions from without. Óláfr is able to displace Hákon jarl partly because the latter makes himself unpopular, but his son Eiríkr proves to be a formidable rival when the time is ripe. From another quarter the Jomsvikings in Wendland launch a major attack for political reasons that are not transparent, and they are turned back only with the greatest difficulty. On the Swedish front Óláfr has hostile dealings with Queen Sigríðr, and the Swedes find themselves more naturally aligned with the pagan traditionalists against the Christian innovators. To the south Óláfr alienates the Danish king Sveinn by marrying his sister Þyri without observing the diplomatic niceties. Even the relations with the Icelanders are somewhat soured by Óláfr's dispatching of the heavy-handed missionary Þangbrandr to Iceland and his zealotry in dealing with important Icelandic visitors at his court.<sup>15</sup>

The picture that emerges from these interactions is not the historical progress of a nation but a perilous exposure to outside interests. These interests combine in a grand alliance against Óláfr including the Swedish king, the Danish king, and Hákon jarl's son Eiríkr. Despite the truly heroic dimensions attributed to Óláfr and some overt disparaging of his enemies, he is no match for such a coalition and succumbs. At the conclusion of the battle he disappears with no clear indication of what became of him.

The author of this story had a particularly full account available to him in the biography of Óláfr Tryggvason written by Oddr Snorrason in the period 1180–1200. It is, however, evident that he completely transformed the previous account. Oddr's saga falls easily into three parts: the story of his birth and escape to Russia from the clutches of Queen Gunnhildr, a long and repetitive sequence of conversion episodes, and a preface to, and description of, the final battle at Svölðr. The version in *Heimskringla* I bears no resemblance to this outline. In the first place, the author suppresses all but a few

of the conversion incidents so that they can no longer be considered the main body of the text. What remains is interspersed with other material and covers a mere thirty pages. With the de-emphasis on conversion activities goes a certain downgrading of Óláfr's identity as a conversion king.

Instead, the narrative is more generally distributed over a variety of characters. Thus the first seventy-five pages interweave the early years of Óláfr Tryggvason with the last days of Hákon jarl. Some fifteen pages are set aside for the aggression of the Jomsvikings and the great Battle of Hjörungavágr. The last thirty to thirty-five pages are even more diversified. They report the death of the last of Eiríkr's and Gunnhildr's sons, the raiding activities of Eiríkr Hákonarson after his father is killed, the attempt to marry the Danish king's sister Þyri to King Búrizláfr in Wendland and her defection, and finally the gathering of the allies for the attack on Óláfr at Svölðr. The effect of this diversification is to highlight not the religious revolution but the political situation in Norway, which finds itself in the eye of a gathering storm.

The result of the concerted attack on the Norwegian king is the dismemberment of his country. The victors meet in the last chapter to share the spoils. Four districts of Þrándheimr, both North and South Mørr, Raumsdalr, and a stretch of eastern Norway fall to the lot of the Swedish king, but he allocates them to Sveinn, the son of Hákon jarl, who has become his son-in-law. Sveinn's older half-brother Eiríkr Hákonarson gets four districts of Þrándheimr in addition to Hálogaland, Naumudalr, Firðir, Fjalir, Sogn, Hørðaland, Rogaland, and Agðir, that is to say, the greater part of the west coast. King Sveinn of Denmark asserts the traditional Danish claim to Vík but grants Raumaríki and Heiðmörk to Eiríkr. In this division Eiríkr has a dominant position, but Norway has to some extent returned to the fragmented state in which Haraldr hárfagri found it, so that the unifying efforts of a hundred years have come to naught.

It is possible for the modern reader to construe *Heimskringla* I as a tale of Norway's isolation and breakdown for, as it turns out, a period of fifteen years. This perspective is quite novel in comparison to what we find in the earlier versions of Óláfr Tryggvason's life. The earlier versions focus more on the crowning success of Óláfr's conversion efforts, which will have the effect of changing Norway's spiritual



outlook for the foreseeable future. The early texts see Óláfr's reign as a triumphant moment, but in *Heimskringla* I it could be read as a serious setback. We would of course like to know how the author intended us to read the text, but he does not provide us with a clear set of criteria. He certainly allows latitude for an appreciation of Christian progress, but there is equal latitude for an interpretation of political failure.

If Óláfr's reign climaxes in failure, we would like some assessment of the reasons, but this is the kind of analysis of which saga authors are quite sparing. In this case the author does not venture an evaluation of Óláfr's strengths and weaknesses; he merely registers victories and defeats. Are we to believe that Óláfr's imposition of Christianity was too vigorous and forced the Norwegians to break with their time-honored traditions prematurely? Are we to believe that he was not sufficiently diplomatic in dealing with his brother kings in Sweden and Denmark? The author provides no adequate indications that would allow us to address these issues. The same questions will have to be posed when Óláfr Haraldsson succumbs at Stiklarstaðir thirty years later, but in the case of Óláfr Tryggvason they do not seem to be either formulated or answered. Perhaps we are to understand that success and failure are always balanced on a knife's edge, but that too constitutes a view of history. When, at the beginning of the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson, Óláfr has a lucky stroke and captures his opponent Hákon Eiríksson, he tells him that his good luck has run out, but Hákon replies: "What has happened to us is not misfortune. It has long been the case that sometimes one side and sometimes the other emerges victorious."<sup>16</sup> We will see, however, that in the story of the second Óláfr the vagaries of fortune may not be an adequate historical explanation.

### The Saga of Saint Óláfr

The transition from one Óláfr to the next is peculiar in several respects. In the first place, there is no account of the fifteen years of Danish rule that separate them, a period that *Ágrip* describes as a time of tyranny and hardship.<sup>17</sup> The author of *Heimskringla*, despite a broad view of history, seems in this instance to have been more interested in royal biography than in the sequence of Norwegian events. In the second place, although the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason tells in rich and quite

dramatic detail about the protagonist's birth and escape from Norway, *Heimskringla* II has nothing to say about the circumstances of Óláfr Haraldsson's birth. We learn only that he is raised by his mother Ásta and stepfather Sigurðr sýr and shows early signs of a dominant personality. He begins his viking career at the age of twelve, with details that are extracted from twenty-four stanzas.

His return to Norway is similarly unelaborated in contrast to the preparatory moves that usher in Óláfr Tryggvason's return and the colorful demise of Hákon jarl. Óláfr Haraldsson simply lands with two large ships and an insignificant contingent of 220 men. He then has the good luck of devising a stratagem to capsize the ship of Hákon jarl Eiríksson, the son of Eiríkr Hákonarson, and then convincing him to desist from any further claim to Norway. He pursues his campaign by presenting himself in his native Vestfold, where he is well received, and by appealing to his stepfather Sigurðr sýr for assistance. Sigurðr is cautious and circumspect, but his mother Ásta scorns caution in the best tradition of the caustic and ambitious mother. Sigurðr accedes but insists on public consultation.

There follows a most illuminating debate led by two petty kings from Heiðmörk, Hrærekr and Hringr; they deal precisely with the issues that were not explored in the case of Óláfr Tryggvason.<sup>18</sup> It is as if the author is compensating for the theoretical omission in the previous saga, though we know too little about the author (or authors) to make any direct connection. Hrærekr is the first to speak and begins by noting the collapse of the kingdom of Haraldr hárfagri and the absence of a central monarch.<sup>19</sup> To this he appends a thumbnail sketch of Norwegian history, the successful reign of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, but the domineering and unjust reign of Gunnhildr's sons, who induced the people to prefer a foreign king less immediately involved in Norwegian affairs and therefore less oppressive. There was support for Hákon jarl, but he too became "harsh and grasping" toward the people, who eventually killed him. The same pattern repeated itself under Óláfr Tryggvason, who had the right lineage and qualities to succeed Haraldr hárfagri, but when he reached the pinnacle of power, everyone lost their freedom. He was aggressive toward the chieftains, and no one was at liberty to choose what god to believe in. Hrærekr concludes by doubting whether having a kinsman as king will improve his lot.

This is precisely the sort of critique that is missing in the saga devoted to Óláfr Tryggvason, but it emerges in retrospect that he too could be viewed as tyrannical and therefore vulnerable to public resentment. Hrærekr's brother Hringr delivers the response, arguing that luck will determine whether Óláfr Haraldsson becomes sole king, but that if he does succeed, and the people are aligned with him, there is a good expectation that they will be rewarded. The reader may sense that Hrærekr has offered the sounder arguments, but the listeners at the assembly are convinced by Hringr, and Óláfr is accepted as king in Upplönd.

He must first contend with the residue of division left by Óláfr Tryggvason's defeat. Since the defeat was at the hands of three opponents, Óláfr Haraldsson must do battle on three fronts, against the opposition within Norway, against the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson who has installed his son-in-law Sveinn Hákonarson in Norway and feels proprietary about his share of the realm, and ultimately against Knútr inn ríki Sveinsson, who rules England as well as Denmark. In other words he must confront the burden of recent history in the form of a splintered realm. He is at first successful but in the long run a victim of local traditions because the divisions run too deep. He is able to defeat Sveinn Hákonarson in a naval battle at Nesjar and force him abroad, where he dies not long after. But that turns out to be only half a victory because Sveinn's sponsor, King Óláfr of Sweden, believes that he still has a claim in Norway. Indeed, he believes that he has conquered Norway, as he tells the Icelandic diplomat Hjalti Skeggjason in no uncertain terms.<sup>20</sup>

The hostility between Óláfr of Norway and Óláfr of Sweden goes on for the best part of a hundred pages. The Norwegian king is willing to make peace, but his Swedish counterpart is angered to the point of not allowing his rival to be referred to by his proper name in his presence; instead he is to be referred to as "the stocky fellow." The Swedish king most certainly refuses to consider for a moment the possibility of a marriage alliance between his daughter and the Norwegian Óláfr. The story of the Swedish king takes on broader and more metaphorical dimensions because the Swedish people want peace. The story becomes therefore not so much the tale of a royal feud as a political parable in which the power of the people is balanced against royal autocracy. This focus recalls the insistence of Óláfr



Haraldsson's stepfather, Sigurðr sýr, that the people be consulted with respect to Óláfr's royal aspirations. In *Heimskringla* II the people have a voice, and that voice speaks loudly at the Swedish court.

In the saga as a whole we may identify what could be termed a Swedish interlude.<sup>21</sup> Prominent in this interlude are two Swedish "lawmen," Þorgnýr Þorgnýsson and Emundr af Skǫrum, who confront the Swedish king on behalf of the Swedish people, the first with a direct denunciation and the second with a series of metaphorical stories that must be interpreted but are no less admonitory. The upshot is that the will of the people prevails and that the king must share the throne with his more acceptable son Jákob/Ǫnundr. This digression amounts to a peaceful revolution. We may wonder why so much detail is devoted to events in Sweden that are connected only tangentially with what is, after all, a Norwegian history. It is tempting to believe that it is not so much the focus on history that dictates the inclusion of the Swedish digression as it is the political problem of a king's relationship to his people. The Icelandic writer may well have felt that a discussion of royal autocracy and popular dissent was a little too dangerous to locate as close to home as Norway and therefore removed it to the safe distance of the Swedish court; the issues raised in one location may be equally applicable in the other. In short, the Swedish interlude may be viewed as a political digression that provides a general study of the strains between people and monarch.

Such an understanding is reinforced by the stories that surround the Swedish interlude and deal with the relationship between certain individuals and certain entities with the king. The first of these separates the episodes on the Swedish "lawmen" Þorgnýr and Emundr and is devoted to the petty king Hrærekr who opposed Óláfr's claim to kingship at the conference in Haðaland and was subsequently captured and blinded.<sup>22</sup> The tale recounts Hrærekr's ingenuity in overcoming his disability and attempting to evade the king's custody; it engages at least as much sympathy for Hrærekr as for King Óláfr.

Following the Swedish interlude the author provides a short history of the jarls in Orkney and, in particular, an account of how King Óláfr imposes his will on the jarls and is able to add Orkney to his territorial possessions. The account shows Óláfr at his devious worst as he manipulates power and his own view of precedent to realize his

political ambitions. This coup is followed by more conversion activity, which might also be viewed as a manipulation of the people and which culminates in the well-told story of how Óláfr converts the pagan chieftain Dala-Guðbrandr by force and rank intimidation.<sup>23</sup> More purely political is the submission of the great Prændalög chieftain Einarr þambarskelfir and the great western chieftain Erlingr Skjálgsson.<sup>24</sup>

What follows is a sequence of two-edged stories. On the one hand they are designed to exhibit the king's power and ambition, but they also suggest a degree of vulnerability. The first one is centered on a certain Ásbjörn Sigurðarson from Qmð in the north and it is both long and suggestive.<sup>25</sup> The king has forbidden the export of grain to the north in a year of famine. Ásbjörn manages to circumvent the prohibition, but one of the king's agents confiscates his cargo of grain and humiliates him into the bargain. Ásbjörn contrives to take revenge by killing the agent in the very presence of the king. He is scheduled to be executed by the king's order, but a visiting Icelander manages to delay the execution with various stratagems until Ásbjörn's uncle Erlingr Skjálgsson arrives with a large enough armed contingent to thwart the king's command. A resolution is finally arrived at whereby Ásbjörn agrees to serve in the place of the slain agent, but once he gets home, his uncle Þórir hundr convinces him not to become the king's "slave" and to remain at home in an independent capacity. The king must therefore forgo his judicial privilege, swallow his pride, and lose any semblance of compensation.

After some renewed conversion activity and the birth of Óláfr's son Magnús, a second story is related in the same style. It records the killing of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson by a certain Ásmundr Grankelsson, who is in the king's service.<sup>26</sup> Ásbjörn's mother incites Þórir hundr against the king, and the effect of the hostility, though long deferred, will be realized in due course. This is a case in which the king is not directly responsible, but it illustrates the risks inherent in the always potentially dangerous dealings between kings and chieftains.

On the heels of these ominous tales of revenge and counter-revenge comes a short but famous account of King Óláfr's initiatives in Iceland.<sup>27</sup> He sends an Icelandic delegate with the request that the northern Icelanders grant him the small island of Grímsey off Eyjafjörðr. People are at first receptive to the idea, but the wise chieftain Einarr Eyjólfsson at Þverá delivers a decisive speech outlining the perils incurred in giving the Norwegian king a foothold so close



to the Icelandic coast. The people take the warning to heart and decline to part with the island. The underlying message seems to be that King Óláfr's underhanded designs must be subjected to the most exacting scrutiny by the wisest analysts. Óláfr's back-up plan is then to issue an invitation to several of the most important Icelandic chieftains, but by this time caution has prevailed and the chieftains decide not to go themselves but to send others in their stead. What such a royal invitation entails becomes clear in the next episode, in which Óláfr lures several leading Faroe Islanders to his court and forces them to become his liegemen. Only the most intelligent of the Faroese chieftains penetrates the design, feigns a diplomatic illness, and declines to accept the invitation. The North Atlantic islands seem to be constantly in the position of fending off Óláfr's contrivances.

Although Óláfr appears to be registering a series of successes, he also pays a price for his authoritarian ways. King Knútr inn ríki of Denmark and England, together with Hákon jarl, the son of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson, also has a claim on Norway, but refrains from activating it as long as Óláfr continues to be popular. When, however, Óláfr's chieftains begin to feel that they are becoming "disenfranchised under his rule," they start defecting to King Knútr inn ríki, and they communicate their dissatisfaction openly: "Many of those who came from Norway complained of their disenfranchisement and declared it to Hákon jarl, and some to the king himself; they said that the Norwegians would be prepared to return to the rule of King Knútr inn ríki and the jarl and receive their freedom from them."<sup>28</sup> Knútr inn ríki is persuaded and dispatches messengers to Óláfr to lodge his claim. Óláfr roundly rejects the demand and forms an alliance with the Swedish king Qnundr. At this point there is a halt in the narrative to make room for another episodic story.

Two brothers in the king's service, Karli and Gunnsteinn, form a trading partnership with King Óláfr and set out with a small band for Permia (the Kola Peninsula), but before doing so they are joined by Þórir hundr with a rather intimidating, and definitely uninvited, force of eighty men.<sup>29</sup> They reluctantly agree to this collaboration, but Karli is eventually killed by Þórir, who then seizes all the merchandise and booty that they have accumulated. King Óláfr mounts a deceptive mission to recover his losses, but Þórir is able to make good his escape to King Knútr inn ríki's court with his ill-gotten gains largely intact. For all his ingenuity, Óláfr once more draws the shorter straw and



must put his trading venture in the debit column both financially and politically. Þórir becomes an example of how Norway slips from his grasp. The tale is interspersed with additional information on Óláfr's Swedish alliance, his dealings with the Faroe Islands, and, as a new facet, his detention of several notable Icelanders at his court, pending an Icelandic decision to submit to his laws and pay taxes.

The Icelandic hostages become the pivot for more internal dissension in Norway.<sup>30</sup> One of them, Steinn Skaptason, takes refuge with the wife of one of four brothers of distinguished lineage, the sons of Árni Armóðsson. It is the wife of Þorbergr Árnason who undertakes to protect the refugee Steinn and thus precipitates contention with King Óláfr. Three of the brothers submit to Óláfr, but the fourth, Kálfr, becomes an important figure in the resistance to the king. Steinn is spared the king's full wrath and makes his way to King Knútr inn ríki's court. Another Icelandic hostage, Þóroddr Snorrason, escapes and has a fairy tale adventure with an outlaw who has a heart of gold.<sup>31</sup> Þóroddr is subsequently able to make peace with Óláfr, but the fact remains that the Icelandic hostages, who are in effect held for tribute, undergo considerable hardships before they can make good their escape. At the same time they become a factor in the growing resistance to King Óláfr. After some additional information on the king's failure to collect taxes in the Faroe Islands the story returns to the alliance between the Norwegian and Swedish kings.

The conflict between King Knútr inn ríki and the alliance of Norwegians and Swedes culminates in an indecisive naval engagement off the coast of Skáney (Skåne, Scania). While the Swedes return home in the face of oncoming winter, Knútr inn ríki and Óláfr remain in place, but Knútr's agents begin to corrupt the Norwegians with outright gifts or promises of money. Óláfr senses that there is defection in his ranks and hesitates to expose himself to Knútr's forces by sailing through the Øresund, as Ólafr Tryggvason once did to his great misfortune. Instead he proposes to leave his ships in Sweden and return to Norway overland. The maneuver succeeds, but King Knútr's campaign of corruption continues and provokes executions in Norway that are unpopular. Meanwhile Knútr assembles a very large army, while Óláfr has little success in raising troops for his cause. Knútr is therefore able to land in Norway unopposed; he is acclaimed as king first in Agðir

and later as far north as Þrándheimr. Knútr turns the realm over to Hákon jarl, and Einarr Þambarskelfir in particular is returned to his former position of authority.

Though virtually abandoned, Óláfr does manage to win a naval engagement against Erlingr Skjálgsson, but that victory is transformed into the ultimate defeat when one of Óláfr's men kills the captured Erlingr with an ax stroke. Óláfr had clearly intended to spare him in the hope of a last-minute alliance. Erlingr's death provokes Óláfr's famous rejoinder ("Now you have struck Norway out of my hands.") and leaves him with no alternative but to retreat across Norway to Sweden. This is effectively the end of his reign and provides the occasion for a total evaluation of his character and an assessment of his rule:<sup>32</sup>

We are told that King Óláfr was upright and devout in his prayers to God all the days of his life, but as he realized that his power was coming to an end and his opponents were gaining the upper hand, he devoted himself wholly to the service of God. He was not remiss in his other concerns or the labor he had previously initiated, for as long as he occupied the throne he had labored at what seemed to him of greatest value, first of all to release and save the country from the oppression of foreign leaders, and then to convert the people of the country to the true faith and establish laws and legal administration, and for the sake of justice he punished those who committed wrong. . . . He meted out punishments to both the powerful and powerless, but that seemed presumptuous to the people of the country and they were animated by enmity in opposition when they lost their kinsmen under a just rule, even though the charges were justified. The origin of the resistance that the people of the country offered King Óláfr was that they would not suffer his justice, but he preferred to forgo privilege rather than justice. But the charge that he was stingy with his men was not justified. He was most generous toward his friends. But it happened, when people waged resistance against him, that he seemed hard and harsh to them, whereas King Knútr offered great sums of money, and the greatest chieftains were deceived when he promised each of them honors and authority; furthermore people in Norway were eager to accept Hákon jarl, for he had been most beloved by the people while he ruled the land.

This paragraph appears to tell us everything the author wishes us to know about King Óláfr, his rule, and the reasons for his ultimate failure. He was, especially in his waning years, reliably Christian. He freed Norway from foreign rulers and established the rule of law. He was impartial in his application of justice, favoring no one group over another, but people did not tolerate his justice even though the charges brought against them were correct. He was generous to his friends but was simply outspent and outpromised by King Knútr. In addition, he had to contend with a particularly popular rival. The portrait is altogether positive, and the reverses suffered by the king are explained by unreasonable subjects and financial aggression on the part of King Knútr. But how well does this glowing portrait agree with the story that has been told? Does the story in fact lead the reader to evaluate King Óláfr in similarly favorable terms?<sup>33</sup>

In the Swedish prelude Óláfr remains unscathed; disfavor falls rather on the Swedish king, who alienates his subjects. But if we attempt to integrate the rather unusual attention to Swedish politics into the narrative as a whole, it could be understood as a warning about what lies in Óláfr Haraldsson's future. We need not wait long to see what this future holds. It is illumined first of all by the king's dealing with the jarls of Orkney. He astutely, but forcibly, drives wedges between the jarls and obliges them to become his liegemen. The reader must decide whether this is a matter of clever politics or high-level trickery, but it partakes of neither the religion, nor the justice, nor the impartiality proclaimed by the author.

Óláfr's conversion (or reconversion) of his countrymen certainly accords with his Christianity, but here too there could be critical undertones since the mission is conducted by force. We must bear in mind the retrospective critique of Óláfr Tryggvason's forced conversions in the speech that Hrærekr delivers at the outset of the saga:<sup>34</sup>

When Óláfr thought that his power was fully established, no one was his own master because of him. He treated us petty kings aggressively in collecting all the taxes imposed by Haraldr hárfagri, and in some matters he was [still] more aggressive; people were even less their own masters because no one could decide [on his own] what god he should believe in.



Once again the reader must determine whether Óláfr's adamant imposition of Christianity is correct in the long term, whatever the short-term cost, or whether it involves an element of autocratic overreach. In light of the phrasing in Hrærekr's speech we cannot believe that all services to Christian belief, however extreme, should be regarded as positive.

Most illustrative of Óláfr's difficulties with the entrenched Norwegian chieftains is his relationship with the great western chieftain Erlingr Skjálgsson. It requires complex negotiations for Erlingr to come to an understanding with Óláfr, who must be persuaded that "there is no more important support for the king than Erlingr."<sup>35</sup> Even so they are only "sáttir at kalla" (nominally reconciled). Their reconciliation is severely strained when Erlingr's nephew Ásbjörn Sigurðarson takes revenge by killing a man in the king's presence and is bound over for execution by the king. Erlingr intervenes with a large enough force to face the king down, and their differences once more become acute. The king may have the letter of the law on his side, but most readers will sense greater sympathy for Erlingr. The sympathy is not diminished when Erlingr is struck down by one of the king's followers. This killing is not approved by the king, but there may be some reason for the killer to believe that it is. What is in any event clear is that Óláfr is unable to work out a manageable collaboration with this chieftain or several others. Diplomacy is not one of his skills.

This shortcoming is again on display when he ventures beyond the borders of Norway to Orkney, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. In all three locations he uses main force and trickery for no just cause; his aim is territorial gain, and his methods are deceitful. In Orkney he sets the local jarls against each other to his own advantage. In Iceland he hides a military plan under a seemingly innocent request, a plan that is penetrated only by the perceptive Einarr Eyjólfsen. In the Faroe Islands he bends several leaders to his will and is resisted only by the equally resourceful Þrándr í Gøtu. The king tries to collect tribute but is repeatedly thwarted, again, one suspects, under the auspices of the impenetrable Þrándr. The designs on Iceland culminate in the detention of notable Icelanders at the Norwegian court until such time as the Icelanders at home will submit to the king's will. This amounts to international blackmail, and the stories of these hostages are cast as heroic escape dramas.

When King Knútr inn ríki of England and Denmark finally steps onto the stage in a serious way, he is given the benefit of quite a different portrait. He levies taxes to an extent not matched by other kings, but he also provides a greater return. In addition he leaves the old traditions unabridged: “In his whole realm there was such undisturbed peace that no one dared to challenge it, and the natives themselves enjoyed peace and their traditional laws. As a result he gained great fame in all lands.”<sup>36</sup> Knútr is therefore a great adversary not only by virtue of his military power but also by virtue of his leadership qualities. The Norwegian refugees who come to his court make the contrast quite explicit (*ibid.*): “Many of those who came from Norway complained of their disenfranchisement. . . .” The word rendered by “disenfranchisement” is “ófrelsi” (unfreedom), and “freedom” is a theme in the kings’ sagas that awaits special study. Deprivation of freedom was also a charge lodged against Haraldr hárfagri and was understood to have motivated the emigration to Iceland. “Ófrelsi” would therefore have had an especially negative flavor in the lexicon of an Icelandic writer.

The record compiled in this saga does not conform very well to the emphasis on Christian devotion, the rule of law, the evenhanded application of justice, and the practice of generosity attributed to Óláfr in the author’s summation. This summation takes no account of his forced conversions, his inability to collaborate with the chieftains already in place, his trickery, and his at once forceful and deceitful methods used in bringing the island territories to the west under his control. How should we reconcile the narration with the summation? I have made the case elsewhere that the author of *Heimskringla* III mediates between the Icelandic outlook in *Morkinskinna* and the Norwegian outlook in *Fagrskinna*.<sup>37</sup>

We could surmise that *Heimskringla* II represents a similar compromise: that the narrative was primarily conceived for an Icelandic readership with reservations about kingship, while the summation, with its more pious regard for Óláfr’s saintly status, was written with a Norwegian readership in mind. The result is a collision between the saintly tradition and a more secular orientation. In the *Oldest Saga* and the *Legendary Saga* the saintly tradition prevailed, but in *Heimskringla* II the secular viewpoint dominated, with a small nod to the saintly profile in the final summation.

The last days of King Óláfr need not detain us. His retreat from Norway to Sweden is marked by a number of miraculous moments that document his saintliness. He eventually makes his way to Russia, where he learns that his successor in Norway, Hákon jarl Eiríksson, has disappeared at sea. He therefore yearns to return to Norway and is able to do so with the aid of the Swedish king. His march to his destiny at Stiklarstaðir near Trondheim is highlighted in particular by his insistence on recruiting only warriors who are firmly committed Christians, but his devotion is to no avail and he succumbs to a numerically superior force of farmers under the leadership of the chieftains who have defected from him.

We will not dwell at length on the narrative in *Heimskringla* III. Down to 1157 it follows closely the model of *Morkinskinna*, and presumably it did so as well for the years between 1157 and 1177 that are missing in *Morkinskinna*. With *Morkinskinna* it adheres to the theme of shared kingship. After the demise of King Óláfr the leaders of Þrændalög regret their actions and recall Óláfr's illegitimate son Magnús from Russia. Magnús proves to be an ideal choice, but very soon his uncle Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson demands and is able to negotiate a share in the realm. There is some tension between the co-regents but no overt feud. Magnús dies young and is greatly lamented by the people, but his death opens the way for Haraldr to reign for the twenty years from 1046 to 1066, when he falls at Stamford Bridge in a vain attempt to conquer England. He is succeeded by his son Óláfr kyrri, who gives Norway the blessings of a pacific reign of twenty-seven years down to 1093. Óláfr is in turn succeeded by Magnús berfœttr, who reverts to his grandfather's acquisitive ambitions and ultimately falls in a military expedition in Ireland in 1103. Because of the premature death of his nephew Hákon, who is declared king in Upplönd, Magnús is not challenged for the throne.

There is, however, a real division of the realm under his sons, first a three-way division among Sigurðr jórsalafari, Eysteinn, and Óláfr, then after Óláfr's early death, a two-way division between Sigurðr and Eysteinn. Again there is some tension but no overt strife. Sigurðr inherits the military aspirations of Haraldr harðráði and Magnús berfœttr, while Eysteinn inherits the domestic focus of Magnús góði and Óláfr kyrri. The contrast is explicitly detailed in a verbal duel between the two kings (a *senna* or "flyting"), in which Sigurðr lauds



his prowess and Eysteinn celebrates his contributions to the welfare of the country. Despite his military impulses Sigurðr is granted the longer life and dies in 1130. Before he dies, however, a certain Haraldr Gillikristr comes from Ireland claiming that he too is a son of Magnús berfœttr. He is able to verify the claim by ordeal and is accepted by Sigurðr.

When Sigurðr subsequently dies, he is succeeded by his son Magnús, but, disregarding an earlier agreement not to contest Magnús's kingship, Haraldr gilli asserts a claim to the throne. At this point the division of kingship becomes not just a potential hazard but the cause of open hostilities between the two rivals. Haraldr has the upper hand, captures Magnús, and blinds him in 1135 so as to disqualify him from any further claim to the throne. The following year Haraldr is himself killed by another pretender, Sigurðr slembidjákn. This bloody sequence becomes the point of departure for the hundred years of civil strife in Norway down to ca. 1230. The strife is often fueled by very doubtful claims to the throne, to which we will turn in the next chapter.

If we attempt to identify an overall theme in *Heimskringla*, it might be the emergence of Norway as a unified realm and the subsequent challenges to this unity. Unification is achieved by, or attributed to, Haraldr hárfagri and was regarded in retrospect as a relatively and surprisingly easy transition, although the process must have been far more contentious in reality.<sup>38</sup> The hard-won nationhood was almost immediately threatened by the conflict between Hákon góði and Haraldr hárfagri's other sons, but Hákon's death averted a permanent split. Hákon jarl Sigurðarson restricted his claim largely to his ancestral lands in Þrændalög but did not exacerbate inner divisions by asserting a national kingship.

This claim was deferred to the time of Óláfr Tryggvason, who may have been motivated by the wish to impose a national religion, but *Heimskringla* suggests that this project was as divisive as it was correct. Óláfr's single-mindedness led in any event to the collapse of national unity and a Danish interregnum until 1015 when Óláfr Haraldsson once more asserted a Norwegian claim. But he too fostered internal divisiveness and gave rise to a Danish restoration. Magnús góði and Haraldr harðráði again wrested Norway from Danish control, but they revived the old problem of rival claims to the throne and shared rule. Haraldr also revived the issue of territorial

ambitions abroad in the spirit of Óláfr Haraldsson and at the cost of his own life. Haraldr's foreign adventurism not only echoes the risky policies of Óláfr Haraldsson abroad but establishes an ongoing theme, the question of the relative importance of domestic policy and foreign policy and the narrower question of whether a focus on expansionism is detrimental to a peaceful and progressive policy at home. This question emerges as a central concern in "Magnúss saga berfœtts" and even more explicitly in the story of the rival priorities under King Sigurðr jórsalafari and King Eysteinn Magnússon.

As *Heimskringla* progresses there is a double emphasis on national coherence and internal stability in the face of internecine rivalries and external distractions, in short on the viability of Norway once it emerges as a nation under Haraldr hárfagri. This complex of problems would have been especially vivid during the period of Norwegian wars from 1135 to ca. 1230, a period characterized by insoluble rivalries and repeated recourse to the Danish king. Inevitably this political atmosphere would have colored the view of Norwegian history in the eyes of observers during the civil war era and would have led them to stress the threat of division even in the earlier period leading up to the civil wars. *Heimskringla* clearly conceives of Norway as a nation in recurring peril, but it is remarkable that the concept of nationhood is so explicit, and we must ask where it originates.

This question takes us back to the prologue at the beginning of *Heimskringla* I. The prologue is four pages long in the ÍF edition, two pages on the mostly poetic sources and two pages on Ari Þorgilsson. The author begins by characterizing Ari's *Íslendingabók*, adding that, "as he himself relates," he told the "lives of the Norwegian kings according to the narration of Oddr Kolsson, Oddr being the son of Hallr af Síðu, and that Oddr learned from Þorgeirr af ráðskollr, a man who was wise and so old that he lived in Niðarnes when Hákon jarl the Mighty was killed [995]."<sup>39</sup> The author then goes on in similar terms to discuss Ari's other sources and their reliability. The mention of "the lives of the Norwegian kings" could allude to a fuller version of *Íslendingabók*, as many scholars have thought, or it could allude to a separate book.<sup>40</sup>

The kings' lives referred to have been a long-standing mystery. Some scholars have thought that they must have been very short, but others have thought that they may have been more substantial.

It seems odd that the author would have devoted half his prologue to Ari if the latter had provided only a brief listing, and therefore more likely that he wrote something more nearly approximating history. In the absence of the kings' lives we can only surmise what kind of history it may have been on the basis of what Ari writes in the extant *Íslendingabók*. The author of the *Heimskringla* prologue characterizes *Íslendingabók* in a few words:<sup>41</sup>

He mostly wrote at the beginning of his book about the settlement of Iceland and the establishing of laws, then about the lawspeakers and how long each had recited, and pursued the chronology first to the time when Christianity came to Iceland and then down to his own day.

This amounts to an abbreviated restatement of the table of contents with which Ari prefaces *Íslendingabók*:<sup>42</sup>

In hoc codice continentur capitula. About the settlement of Iceland I. About the settlers. II. And establishing laws. About the establishment of the *alþingi* III. About the calendar IIII. About the division of quarters V. About the settlement of Greenland VI. About the coming of Christianity to Iceland VII. About foreign bishops VIII. About Bishop Ísleifr IX. About Bishop Gizurr [X].

There has been some discussion about when the Icelanders first perceived themselves as Icelanders, that is, as a separate national entity.<sup>43</sup> It seems clear that Ari sees the Icelanders as a group apart, with a separate origin, separate institutions, and separate leaders (whether lawspeakers or bishops). Ari sets them apart by referring to “foreign” bishops, and later in the book he will use the term “we countrymen” or “the people of the country.”<sup>44</sup> He therefore has a quite palpable idea of a national grouping distinct from others. The reference to “lives of the Norwegian kings” in the prologue to *Heimskringla* must therefore also imply a national entity called Norway. The topics dealt with in *Heimskringla* are in fact reminiscent of the chapter headings in *Íslendingabók*: settlement, laws, institutions, regional distinctions, and the advent of Christianity. Even the settlement of Greenland may call to mind Óláfr Haraldsson's forays into the North Atlantic. We might therefore theorize that the author or authors of *Heimskringla* modeled



the outline of Norwegian history on the shape of Ari's history.<sup>45</sup> Both books are about the founding of a nation. The settling of Norway in "Ynglinga saga" and up through *Haralds saga hárfagra*, which is new in relation to earlier Norwegian histories, could be inspired by Ari's account of the Icelandic settlement. Ari's role as a historical model would then explain why he is given such prominence in the prologue to *Heimskringla*. Both Ari and *Heimskringla* trace the rise of a nation, but only *Heimskringla* dwells on the perils of a nation.<sup>46</sup> What had intervened between them was the period of civil unrest in Norway, and that was bound to sharpen perceptions of peril.

